

Racist Resurgences: How Neo-Liberal and Anti-Racist Lefts Make Space for the Far Right in Sweden and the United States

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Recent events in the United States and Sweden, as well as elsewhere in Europe and further afield have caused researchers and journalists alike to highlight the similarities of far right parties across multiple cases in regards to issues of immigration and racism (e.g. Westlake, 2016; Caiani & Parenti, 2016). At the same time, a stream of research highlights the ‘death’ or ‘hollowing out’ of social democracy and the rise of the neoliberal left, focusing on the production of inequality (e.g. Evans & Schmidt, 2012). Less scholarly attention, however, has been paid to the *racial effects* of the neoliberal left and the way that this creates opportunities for the far right.¹ This is the primary goal of this chapter – to explain how the blind spots of the neoliberal left created space for resurgences of far right racism in both the United States and Sweden, and the re-negotiation of boundaries of belonging in the nation.

This account uses a pair of events, which severely disrupted ‘politics as usual’ in their respective countries as a jumping off point. These two events are the November 2016 election of Donald Trump in the United States and the governmental crisis of 2014 in Sweden. This is not a close analysis of those moments, but rather an examination of the background ideological-cultural conditions that allowed these unexpected events to become possible. I use the concept of the *crises of closure* – “acute challenges to the agreed upon boundaries of a membership community” (Schall, 2016: 8) to understand these background

¹ The popular press has, to a certain extent, picked up on this. See, especially, Klein, N. (2016). It was the Democrats’ embrace of neoliberalism that won it for Trump. *The Guardian*, 9.

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conditions. Neoliberalism is an ideology which suggests that unfettered individual freedom, and, by extension, a truly free market, is the primary path to successful societies. This ideology, in both the United States and Sweden, beyond simply providing economic guidance, suggests a set of cultural tools for reconfiguring the boundaries of belonging, not, perhaps, for those seeking entry (e.g. migrants and minorities), but for those seeking to keep out or welcome in new migrants (e.g. voters and parties).

Neoliberalism provides a similar set of tools, but finds a different expression in Sweden compared to the United States, even in the establishment left, reflective of neoliberalism's inherent internal contradictions (on contradictions within neoliberalism, see Campbell & Pedersen, 2001). This is particularly true in the case of neoliberalism's interaction with race. In Sweden, neoliberal racial politics is primarily seen in a shift towards a kind of racial individualism, especially in terms of anti-racist action, and away from structural considerations of racial inequality (Schall, 2016; Schierup & Ålund, 2011). In the United States, the neoliberalism of the left is reflected in a free market-ethos that pushes racial concerns out of focus entirely. Yet, they have something important in common, which is a tendency towards colorblind rhetoric from the establishment left that leaves that part of the political spectrum without adequate tools for effectively combatting openly racist rhetoric, which appeals, in particular, to disaffected working class and unemployed whites in both contexts.

Theoretical Background: Crises of Closure in a Neoliberal World

The study of immigration, diversity and multiculturalism often centers on questions of borders or boundaries, both symbolic and material. Lamont & Molnar (2002), for instance, focus on the way symbolic boundaries – like those of race or

class – harden into social boundaries that prevent access to the benefits of living in a society. Similarly, Jaworsky (2013) discusses the ways concepts of both legal boundaries of belonging (like citizenship) and moral boundaries of belonging (like the sense that a given person or group are “one of us”) are deployed to define others as others and us as us. The finding here, is that there is an important link between legal boundaries – and Anderson, Gibney and Paoletti (2011) add physical boundaries to this as well – and social boundaries, in that the meanings that become attached to physical and legal boundaries are heavily influenced by the moral (and perhaps cultural) boundaries that inform people’s reading of the Other (see, also, Voyer, 2013). In other words, the drawing and hardening of boundaries around a membership group (what Weber, 1978 and Wimmer, 2007 call “social closure”) is dependent on how in-group members perceive and utilize notions of boundaries, both in terms of legal and physical borders and moral and cultural boundaries.

Mismatches between these two sets of boundaries can sometimes provoke conflict over previously agreed upon boundaries. Sometimes, if the scale of these conflicts is large enough – for instance in cases of a large influx of refugees or increased economic marginalization of a subgroup within a larger membership group--crises of closure can occur. Crises of closure (Schall, 2016) refer to moments when the agreed-upon boundaries of a membership community, boundaries that can either include within or “close out” potential new members, become troubled. These crises of closure can center on who gets “let in” to a membership community - *closure-as-entry* which, in the case of national closure, includes things like citizenship or residency rules as well as border security. They can also center on questions around who gets access to the material and/or symbolic benefits of membership – *closure-as-access to goods* which, in the case of national closure, includes things like access to welfare provisions, employment

and cultural goods. These types of closure, often, but not always occur simultaneously and are often deeply entwined. The resolutions of crises can create dramatic changes in the terms on which people are included or excluded, creating shifts in national identity and new cultural-political landscapes (Schall, 2016).

Both the election of Donald Trump and the Swedish governmental crisis of 2014 can be seen as emblematic of on-going crises of closure as both struggles occurred on terrains of entry. In the US case, the focus is on entry both for Central Americans and Muslims, who are central to an ideological struggle between left and right over what it means to be an American (Wong, 2017). In Sweden, that same struggle has occurred over the entrance of refugee/asylum-seeker. In both cases, as well, access-to-goods has been contested for citizen “others”. This is most strongly seen in the US case of African American claims of unequal access to justice and safety (Alexander, 2010), and their claims, even, to Americanness. In Sweden, the claims of long-term and Swedish-born Swedes of immigrant background have also been highlighted by recent political crises.

These crises have been colored by the ideological context in which they are set. Ideology is deeply connected to boundaries, in some ways creating the rules for what is an acceptable dividing line in society, what mechanisms are available for inclusion and what it even means to be “included” (Schall, 2014a). While societies can encompass multiple competing and/or blended ideologies, I focus here on a particular ideological component present in varying degrees in both the United States and Sweden, namely neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is an ideology that favors the free market, and is given concrete form in policies – both proposed and actual – to deregulate many segments of the economy and reduce trade barriers between states. Initially intended to describe a particular type of capitalism ascendant in the late 20th century, the term has expanded to include a whole host of affiliated ideas. Central to neoliberalism is an underlying belief that the individual

is both the prime and proper driver of development (and disorder). For economics, this means a belief that an economic system which leaves individuals as free from government interferences in their economic decision making as possible is most likely to produce growth, as well as what those who ascribe to this ideology deem a fair distribution of resources (Mudge, 2008). In the socio-cultural realm, neoliberalism includes ideas about freedom of choice in cultural contexts and the overwhelming importance of the individual as the causative and explanatory mechanism for much of social life (Springer, Birch and MacLeavy, 2016). Whether these ideas are integral to neoliberalism itself or is an outgrowth of the economic aspects of the ideology is up for debate (see, e.g. Vergaete, 2014).

Applied to race, neoliberalism often features as a source for “colorblind racism,” a term that has been applied both to individual orientations to race (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and to policy contexts (Lieberman, 1998, Alexander, 2010). Colorblind racism encompasses any ideology that either de-emphasizes/denies the role of race in inequalities, or which relegates racism to a problem of individual, anomalous cases of interpersonal racism. Colorblind racism suggests solutions to racial inequality that involve merely ignoring race in favor of other, especially economic, sources of inequality. This adds up to an approach to racism that focuses entirely on individual racist actions to the exclusion of the racial inequalities inherent in systems (Valdez & Cho, 2011). American neoliberalism and Swedish neoliberalism take different forms – the prior being more historically anchored and more integral to American identity than to Swedish – but colorblindness and colorblind racism have become ascendant among the established neoliberal left in both places.

None of this is to say policies intended to deal with difference in various ways have not been present in both places – Sweden’s official, constitutionally anchored multiculturalism, dating back to the mid-1970s was certainly an attempt

to deal with difference. However, this official multiculturalism was not at the time, and has not been even more recently rooted in understanding of differences as *racial* differences (see, e.g. Brännström, 2016 on the omission of the term “race” in Swedish legislation historically). The United States, too, has had a great deal of racially conscious and different conscious legislation, but there has been a swing away from writing race into legislation since the end of the civil rights movement (for examples from the criminal code, see Alexander, 2010).

The establishment left, however, is not the only left force in either place. Crucial to the story told here in both cases is differences, though not necessarily antagonisms, between an establishment left – by which I mean the left represented in the political parties and via official politics – and a “movement left” – by which I mean the host of formal social movements and informal thought-leaders generally on the left side of the political spectrum (see e.g. McAdam & Tarrow, 2010). In this US, this includes, but is not limited to, anti-racist movements like Black Lives Matter and anti-capitalist movements like the Occupy movement that also tend to take radical stances on race and racism. In Sweden, we might place movements like Antifa in this category. Race provides a crucial example for teasing out the differences between the movement left, which tends towards radicalism, and the establishment left, which tends towards conventionalism.

Case 1: The United States, the Democrats and Donald Trump

In November 2016, Americans were stunned by the largely unpredicted victory of presidential candidate Donald Trump. Trump had run on a populist campaign colored by nationalist rhetoric, with blatantly racist tones. When the dust had settled, many Americans on the left were perplexed as to how this could

happen. The undertone to much of the conversation was a question – *how could the American right have gotten so racist?* There has been an explosion of research on the causes of the seeming increase in overt racism among the right, both preceding and following the election, with much of the argument focused on the legitimization of racism that had always been there. Some point to conventional populism (Kivisto, 2017), others to cultural exclusion (Hochschild, 2016), and still others to partisan political resentment (Cramer, 2016). Some, however, paused to consider a different question – *how could the left have lost the very people they/we supposedly fight for, those most vulnerable to the damages caused by economic inequality?* The first question is, of course, an interesting one and the parallels between far rights, and the moderate right contexts that enable them, are an enticing field for potential analysis. Yet, the second question is just as interesting, and just as vital for understanding politics going forward.

It should be noted that voting patterns show that Trump voters were, on the whole, more wealthy than Clinton voters. This is not unexpected. Trump is a businessman who made promises of deregulation and the creation of a friendly business climate. Wealthy Americans, particularly wealthy whites, are the traditional base for the Republican party. While it is worth examining why Trump did not lose these voters, given his anti-establishment profile and extreme record, it is not this group of voters that provided the votes that swung crucial states in Trump's favor. Rather, both new voters and voters who switched from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016 are the part of the polity in need of explanation. Recent research shows that this group, in particular, is overwhelmingly white, non-hispanic, and working class (Morgan & Lee, 2018).²

² Note that another large part of the story is the loss of the population of new Obama voters, largely young and/or non-white, that failed to turn out for Clinton, as well. This is discussed below,

Since Bill Clinton's Administration (1993-2001) especially, the American establishment left has been distinctly neo-liberal, seeking market solutions to problems from welfare (Mink, 2002) to healthcare (Giaino, 2009). Likewise, the Democratic party has done little to stem the bleeding of labor unions or small scale business, including family farms (see, e.g. Robinson, 2000; Reich, 2008). The weakening of the social safety net, the decline in taxes, the dis-investment in education and the loss of small enterprise has meant suffering for most on the lower end of the income scale, including whites. This came to a head in the 2008 economic crash. While Democrats held both houses of Congress until 2011, and the Senate until 2015, a uniquely obstructionist Republican party limited the policy options available to the party. Even without this barrier, however, the modern Democrats had few policy instruments that could have fixed the underlying inequality of the system. The economy recovered, but this recovery was not particularly felt by poor whites in rural areas or in rust belt states, and it was downplayed by the conservative state-level politicians who sounded alarm bells about insolvency, greedy public sector unions and federal overreach. This strategy was largely successful for the Republicans, who came to power in record numbers at the state level during Obama's first term. The neoliberal left had very little with which to respond, either in terms of rhetoric or in terms of policy. Without unions, without strong economic policy levers at the state level and with a recovery that did not correct 30 years of growing inequality, poor whites felt abandoned by Democrats (see, e.g. McQuarrie, 2017 who places rust belt shifts squarely on the shoulders of a Democratic Party inattentive to industrial, working-class whites).

At the same time, poor whites felt that others – African Americans especially, but people of color in general – *were* being included in the Democrats' vision of America via "welfare" and other forms of special treatment on bases that

were unfair or unearned.³ Ironically, people of color did not fare any better than whites during the Great Recession . Due to unequal distributions of wealth and racism in the housing industry, they were hit harder by the initial shock of the program, and their recovery has been slower (Kochar & Fry, 2014). In addition, very little race-specific support was actually offered by the Democrats, and, even within that party, support for group-specific programs like affirmative action have waned. In line with our expectations about neoliberalism and the left, the Democrats continued to offer primarily colorblind solutions to problems of racial inequality (see, e.g. Burke, 2017). However, whites hearing the race conscious rhetoric of the movement left – the anti-police violence Black Lives Matter for instance – likely linked this race consciousness and race-specific remediation to established Democrats. Meanwhile, these outsider groups were engaged in a concerted effort to call out the colorblind racism of the establishment left by, for instance, disrupting events held by Democratic candidates – both ‘insider’ candidate Hilary Clinton and her proxies, as well as ‘outsider’/’movement’ candidate Bernie Sanders. The post-Obama established left had little to offer those poor whites left behind by an economic recovery touted by Hilary Clinton, but also very little to inspire those minority voters who had turned out in droves for Obama.

In sum, the established left has neither the policy tools to conquer economic inequality, nor the conceptual tools to counter the explicit racism of Trump’s far right. Colorblind ideology offers only platitudes about the humanness of humanity. This vocabulary is inadequate for addressing the complex systems of institutional racism, which have long characterized the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). It is even less well suited to countering rhetoric like Trump’s that paints Mexicans, Muslims and African Americans as violent threats to America. Thus poor whites

³ Hochschild, 2016 talks about this as “line jumping,” though she is primarily discussing the attitude and dispositions of solidly Republican voters in the south.

are excluded from the Democratic vision of America's social and moral boundaries via the Democrats' abandonment of them economically, and would, likely, be repelled by a rhetoric explicitly aimed at remediating racial inequality. The Republicans, on the other hand, offer white America a vision of Americanness that states that if only we could control our borders – both physically and socially – America could be come “great again” and, the subtext goes, whites would recover their position of privilege in the ‘natural order’ of American society. Under these conditions, attempts by the movement left to seek inclusion of migrants and minorities in narratives about Americanness can be dismissed as mere “identity politics” – an attempt to make a claim for special treatment based on belonging in a non-white (and, sometimes, non-male) group. Whites, on the other hand, benefit from the elision of whiteness with Americanness, such that if they can be made successful again, regardless of the success or failure of Mexican, Muslim or black Americans, America will be made great again.

The US, then, has experienced a crisis of closure-as-entry and closure-as access-to-good. This crisis has been mostly manufactured by Trump's campaign rhetoric, but has been given space by a neoliberal American left without a clear plan for healing decades of economic harm to poor whites or a race-conscious strategy for moving forward on racial justice. The result has been an electoral victory that has worked to shift the boundaries of belonging in the United States, such that any claims to belong from minorities are met with an increasingly legitimated racist rhetoric that equates belonging in the American nation with whiteness. While the movement left has pushed back stridently on these new boundaries of belonging both pre- and post-election, there has been little sense that they are seeking the kind of unified, but individualistic belonging that has, since the late 1980s, come to characterize the neoliberal ideological commitments of the established, centrist wing of the Democratic party.

Case 2: Sweden, the Anti-Racist Left and the Sweden Democrats

In Sweden, there has not been a single electoral moment analogous to the Trump victory, but rather a steadily growing far right that seems likely to make them one of the top three largest parties after the 2018 election. Nonetheless, the far right in Sweden was behind a governmental crisis in early 2014 that was unusual in the Swedish context, and which highlighted and exacerbated growing divisions in public opinion over immigration. The crisis occurred when, rather than abstaining from a vote on the ruling center-left bloc's (the Red-Green Bloc) budget proposition, as is the norm for non-aligned parties in the Swedish system, the Sweden Democrats voted, instead, for the opposition's budget. Because SD had become the third largest parliamentary party in the 2013 election with an unexpected 13% of the vote, this sunk the government's budget. This meant the Red-Green Bloc would have to govern under the opposition's budget, which they refused to do. Initially, a new and early election was called – something that had happened only once since full suffrage in Sweden. A last minute compromise prevented the new elections from being called, but the underlying problems of SD's refusal to follow established political norms, and intransigence on issues of immigration were not addressed. Furthermore, this so-called “December Compromise” has since fallen apart, leaving SD in a position of power disproportionate to its size. While this has not had a strong influence at the policy level yet, it is likely that as SD becomes more normalized in the party political system, the two other governing blocs will increasingly seek SD support, even if SD remains outside of government.

Behind the crisis was the refusal of SD to support a budget where the Green Party – at the time, largely considered to be the most pro-immigration party in

parliament⁴ – would have any influence on migration policy. SD promised, therefore, to make the unrealized new election a “referendum for or against increased immigration” (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2014). SD are an anti-immigration party. They paint migrants – nearly always Muslim in the SD imagination – as uncivilized, backwards and savage. Like Trump’s depictions of Mexicans, SD describe Muslim immigrants as criminals and, especially, as rapists (see, e.g. Linus Bylund’s statement that “rape is deeply rooted in Islamic culture” and that the Koran says that rape is “a Muslim punishment” Hjärpe, 2014). In SD rhetoric, Muslims are a cultural threat and deeply destructive of the Swedish way of life. SD also points to the Islamic subjection of women and backwards views on same-sex relationships⁵ as well as migrants’ welfare dependency, caused by a culturally predicated lack of work ethic or sense of personal integrity.

They add to this a mainstream critique of immigration that argues that there is a “structural limit” on the number of migrants that can be admitted and that, in particular, the refugee acceptance system is overtaxed and administratively “broken.” Both of these ideas have popular support, but the cultural/crime argument is uniquely expressed by the SD, while the “structural limitation” argument is common both in the media and across all political parties. It is important to note that this argument is common on both the left and the right, as well as that some of the strongest pro-immigration sentiments have come from the established, mainstream center-right. Indeed, the set of visa restrictions and increased border security that followed the 2015 refugee crisis was also

⁴ The title of “most immigrant friendly” party has shifted since then. The Greens were a part of the decision to restrict refugee migration heavily amidst the 2015 refugee crisis. The Center Party is, perhaps, more rightly considered “most immigrant friendly” in the run up to the 2018 election.

⁵ It should be noted that these problems, particularly problems of gender inequality, certainly exist within the Islamic community, these are greatly exaggerated by SD, and most Muslims in Sweden are either secular or non-Fundamentalist.

spearheaded by the Social Democrats with the support of mainstream, centrist parties.

Much like with Trump's election in the US, the success of SD in disrupting politics as usual made the Swedish left ask where they had gone wrong (Borg & Jansson 2015). SD's support came from the young, the working class and the unemployed. Like Trump-voters, they were less educated. Unlike Trump supporters, they were overwhelmingly low income. Like the Democrats, the left sees themselves as the 'natural' choice for this group of voters, though that natural support has eroded in the last two decades.⁶ This left the Red-Green Block asking many of the same question as the American Democrats – how did they lose a part of their 'natural' base to a party so virulent and objectionable?

In the US, the left created space for Trump through a combination of ineffective economic neoliberalism, mainstream colorblind racism and an incorrect perception of race-consciousness and other so-called "identity politics" by poor whites. The left – both the established Red-Green Block and the anti-racist movement left, in Sweden set the stage for the Sweden Democrats through an increasingly individualist conception of anti-racism that abandoned its prior focus on structural and political incorporation. Some of this looks similar the mechanisms of the American left – the abandonment of 'strong' social democracy for 'soft' neoliberalism similar to that found in Tony Blair's Labor Party by the Social Democrats, for instance (see, e.g. Wennström 2016; Schmidt & Evans, 2012). Additionally the adoption by the anti-racist movement left of a pro-immigrant, pro-diversity frame that focuses on the individual experiences of racism and differential treatment of Swedish people of color has shifted the conversation

⁶ The Swedish right, initially unwilling to cooperate with SD – were also left flat-footed by SD's political disruptions. This is an important point in explaining the electoral victory of SD, but is outside the scope of the current argument.

in a culturally neo-liberal direction. Consider, for instance, two high-profile instances of distinctly color-conscious anti-racist talk – a 2013 open letter by author Jonas Hassen Khemiri, a Swedish-born citizen with a Tunisian father (taken up also elsewhere in this volume), and a 2014 parliamentary speech by hip hop artist Jason “Timbuktu” Diakit , the Swedish-born son of a black American civil rights lawyer, which follow similar lines.

Khemiri’s letter, written to then-justice minister Beatrice Ask, became and remains the most-shared article of all time in the Swedish media. It asks Ask to consider what it might be like to go through life in Sweden in darker skin. The picture he paints is one of constant outsidership – and it is a visceral, individualist piece that puts personal experience itself at the center of one’s conception of racism. The letter is distinctly color-conscious, pointing to experiences which are individual, personal and even bodily. While the letter provoked a longer newspaper exchange on structural racism, the letter itself discussed none of that, focusing on interpersonal racism alone.

Similarly, Diakit  pointed to his state of not belonging. Diakit , in a dramatic gesture, held up his Swedish passport and explained that it proved that he was Swedish. Any hatred towards him, therefore, was about his skin color, which made it racism. His legal status as a Swedish citizen did not protect him, in other words, from the personal experience of racism. Diakit ’s speech reflects concerns important to scholars of colorblind racism that see the absence of references to race or color in legal systems as not only not helpful, but actively harmful in terms of racial inequality (e.g. Lieberman, 1998). Diakit ’s speech, an acceptance speech for an award recognizing his anti-racist work, was also shared extensively. Both of these sets of stories hit home. Both of these examples are noteworthy because they do not argue that there is no “space” for people like them in the *structure* of Swedish society. Khemiri and Diakit  are both wildly successful cultural producers

who have traded on their unique experiences as insider/outside in Sweden, and have benefitted from a Swedish system that supports the kinds of art they produce. No one is seeking their official exclusion, as in the case of newly arrived refugees. Rather, they argue that they are pushed out of the boundaries of belonging in their day-to-day lives.

On the one hand, one would expect artists, in particular, to make arguments based on human experience. On the other hand, Khemiri and Diakité have, in other places, made arguments about the lack of structural “space” for immigrants and Swedes of color. Yet, in terms of the public impact of specific interventions in discourse on race, it is these two personal/individualist arguments that made such a large impact. The argument here is an argument about bad people doing racist things. While this was not the dominant discourse of any political party, there has been an upsurge in political talk specifically about racism— not xenophobia or ignorance, but race and racism as seen through the acts of racists and the experiences of distinctly raced individuals. This is paralleled by similar discussions of the experiences of other marginalized groups subject to poor treatment, even outright attack, in the public sphere, such as women and Jews.

The adoption of a more individualist frame by the Swedish anti-racist movement left, makes that discourse look similar to the one on the American movement left. The context and meaning of individualist anti-racism in Sweden is differently nuanced, however. It is a push-back against official colorblindness first and foremost. Everyday racism and popular anti-immigration discourses have been present in Sweden since the first immigrants arrived in Sweden. Yet, Sweden since the late 1980s has been characterized primarily by a constrained official discourse on immigration that has restricted both anti-immigrant sentiment and race- and ethnicity-conscious discourse (see, e.g. Odmalm & Bale, 2015). Indeed, the taboo against mentioning ethnicity or race in a Swedish context has been

considerably stronger on the Swedish left (as well as the right) than on the American left, despite adequate documentation that race plays a role in the experience of immigrants in their day to day life (Voyer, 2016; Hubinette, Hörnfedt, Farahani & Rosales, 2012; Brännström, 2016). It is both the prior silence and the present increase of attention that creates space for a far right resurgence.

This is not to argue that the increase of ‘race talk’ in the Swedish context has created the Sweden Democrats.⁷ On the contrary, it is the attempt to renegotiate boundaries based on cultural individualism, instead, that created that space. For most of recent Swedish history, boundaries of belonging were centered on social democracy with an undercurrent of statist, but not cultural, individualism (see, e.g. Schall, 2016; Bergegren & Trägårdh, 2006). To be Swedish was to be left alone, perhaps in your little red cottage in the woods, supported by and supporting the state. To be belong in the Swedish nation now, according to the anti-racist left, is to participate in a society that has acceptance, recognition and inclusion a a central Swedish characteristic,, while neither stigmatizing nor silencing the fact of racial realities (this is Alexander, 2006’s definition of multiculturalism, see also Schall, 2014b). SD voters – young, less-educated, low-income and unemployed, by and large, find themselves not only on the outside of the new boundaries, but framed as a threat to these boundaries. The irony, of course, is that SD (and their supporters) see Muslim refugees as the threat to Sweden – both quite literally in terms of terrorism and crime, and figuratively in terms of Swedish culture.⁸

⁷ Exclusive attention to structural racism previously left certain kinds of real and valid claims about raced experiences unexpressed or invalidated, in fact. The “mentioning of race” here occurs in a very different context than that talk in the US case.

⁸ This kind of struggle – multiculturalism as threat vs. multiculturalism as the central uniting concept of a new Swedish identity – can be seen, for instance, the use of the sarcastic term *kulturberikare* (“culture enricher”) by Swedish immigrant opponents.

Like poor white Trump voters, these SD voters find themselves unsupported by the current economic and social system, and often unmoored from traditional political distinctions. Where the two sets of voters differ is that this system was built up and then dismantled by a small-s social democracy they still, largely, believe in. Here is where we can see the effect of the abandonment of strong social democracy by the Social Democrats comes. Previously, the social democratic welfare state had acted as an engine of incorporation for both migrants and for potentially marginalized working-class native Swedes (Schall, 2016). When the Swedish Social Democrats took their neoliberal turn in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that engine for incorporation stalled for both of these groups., particularly given the Social Democrats abandonment of full employment as their primary policy goal. Previously loyal working class left voters began to understand migrants, particularly the new, Muslim, non-white asylum-seekers as threats to the viability of that mode of incorporation. The response for some was to attack immigration as unsustainable and the Sweden Democrats provided a vehicle for this kind of attack. Thus the Sweden Democrats fulfill two vital needs for this set of voters – first, a need to see their views about the worth (and, indeed, superiority) of the traditional, white Swedish culture vindicated, and, second, a need to see that the remaining economic prosperity of the welfare state protected⁹ from a group they view as unworthy, and perhaps incapable, of incorporation both economically and culturally.

Conclusions: The Twin Perils of Individualism and Colorblindness

⁹ It should be noted that while SD presents themselves often as protectors of the welfare state, they do not vote consistently in that manner.

It is no inexplicable accident that Donald Trump mentioned Sweden as a site of a non-existent terrorist attack, responding as he was, to a heavily criticized Fox News story about a non-existent immigrant crime epidemic in the country. Sweden as a place “ruined” by immigration has existed for many years in the imaginary of the international far right. Sweden represents a cautionary tale for Americans, and for the far rights of continental Europe as well – a place of fictitious “no go zones” and the supposed “rape capital of the world.”¹⁰ It is of course worthwhile to point out that the site of inclusion which working class whites in the US and working class whites in Sweden imagine are, as a matter of fact, quite different. In the US, the white working class imagines a world where they can succeed by working hard without government interference or assistance. The idea promulgated by the racist right is that both immigrants and American-born minorities do not “buy in” to the American work ethic, and make demands for government assistance that undermine the American dream. In Sweden the cradle-to-grave welfare state, and the trust that underlies it is are a central part of Swedish identity, and it is immigrants’ capacity to undermine that trust and ‘steal’ that welfare that forms the threat. In both cases, however, immigrants and non-whites become the scapegoat for that lost ‘paradise’.

The comparison of these two cases indicates that we ought to be suspicious of overly simple descriptions of either left or right voters. It was not merely the fact that the Democrats have, for years, ignored the so-called ‘economic anxiety’ of rural white voters in the United States, nor the underrepresented social and economic unrest of young, white unemployed men in Sweden that created a soil fertile for a virulently racist far right in both these places. It was also not only backlash against anti-racism or so-called ‘identity politics’ in either place that sent

¹⁰ Trump has used both of these phrases, but they originate in alt-right internet forums

a wave of racists into the halls of governance. Rather, it is the way that these things have co-existed in both places that creates a political landscape in which far right racism becomes legitimized and, indeed, popular. More importantly, there is nothing wrong with calls for cultural inclusion that sometimes get labeled as identity politics. Calls for inclusion that start and end with identity, without proffering a critique of the structural conditions that underlie systems of inequality, however, present a stumbling block for native-born whites, people of color and migrants alike.

In both cases, the key to moving forward is to find compelling ways of resolving crises of closure for poor whites and minorities alike, whether the terms of those closures are centered around American-style or Swedish-style individualism, or other, more community-based ideas of belonging. In both cases, the established, mainstream left, insofar as they continue to follow both economically and culturally neoliberal tenets, seems ill-equipped to offer any notion of belonging. The movement left provides some clues, but does little to bring poor whites into the fold. It should be possible to combine honest and critical conversations on race with honest and critical conversations on economic inequality that include poor whites.

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